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THAI CINEMA SINCE 1970

ANCHALEE CHAIWORAPORN

In the general history of Thailand itself, the period of the 1970s saw the most momentous changes in the country's politics and culture since the change from absolute monarchy to constitutional system that occurred in 1932. Two major political upheavals, the student uprisings of October 14th, 1973 and the attack on demonstrating students on October 6th, 1976, forced into the open the gulf between the power of the military governments and the aspirations of the people. In the first uprising, university students gained a victory in the quest for democracy after 6 days of demonstrations which began at Thammasat University, and culminated with crowds of 500,000 around parliament and the Rama V Memorial, demonstrations which forced the military government of Prime Minister Thanom Kittikajorn and Field Marshal Praphat Charusatien out of office, and indeed out of the country. The military had regularly intervened in politics since 1932, non-army people controlling the government for no more than ten years altogether between 1932 and 1973. Unfortunately, the brief taste of democracy that began in 1973 did not last long. Three years later, the historical record of Thai politics and monarchy was tarnished via an unofficial and yet systematic conspiracy of right-wing groups. On the morning of Oct 6, 1976, army and police units again stormed Thammasat University and fired mercilessly into the demonstrating crowd of unarmed students who were accused of treason against the kingdom and monarchy. The years of 1973 and 1976 are then held in a historical past of Thailand as both a year to remember and a year to forget.

The decade of the 1970s is also a decade of change and development in the cinema, particularly in the emergence of a socially critical cinema. However, one must understand the changes in film as an

ongoing process which were the result of many changing factors in the film industry, as well as a result of changes in society. The so-called cinema of social-criticism did not come up immediately after the victory of the students on Oct 14, 1973. To some extent, the emergence of the Thai new wave in the 1970s and the cinema of social-criticism had been triggered by two other major factors: the decline of 16mm filmmaking in the Thai film industry, and the influence of Western youth counterculture in Thailand generally.

As indicated in the first part, there was a close relationship between the popularity of the actor Mitr Chaibancha and the boom in 16mm filmmaking in the 1960s. The use of 16mm cameras facilitated the condition of mass culture in Thai movies, through enabling the cheap production of movies, limited only by the constraints of Mitr's working schedules, who, it has been reported, might be making up to 20 movies at any one time. This resulted in production companies shooting films with Mitr as quickly as possible. When Mitr died, 16mm filmmaking came to an end. At the same time the rise of 35mm filmmaking was coincidentally facilitated by the phenomenal success of a 35mm film *Tone* ('A Man Called Tone', 1970) in the same year. It was not only that this film boosted the use of the 35mm camera, with its innovative artistic style, and its anti-formulaic plot. *Tone* also broke new ground in terms of visual style and narrative, and so marks a key transitional point in the history of the Thai movie. As a former poster-drawing artist, the newcomer Piak Poster had a developed sense of the visual arts and aesthetic choices. He exercised meticulous control over production details, improved the Thai style of over-the-top acting, and above of all, in a quite significant development, rewrote the way of representing Thai women, creating a new type of heroine. Until *Tone*, the hero in a movie had to be a macho man, and the heroine was obliged to be a pure, young virgin. In *Tone* the heroine was no longer an ideal virgin girl, but possessed a more diverse and adult character. Furthermore, in *Tone* the heroine is raped by a gangster but then she is 'forgiven' by the hero. This was considered a groundbreaking development in Thai movie plots, where, hitherto, if the heroine was raped, she would forever be an outcast.

The arrival of *Tone* and Piak Poster did not mark a complete revolution in Thai filmmaking. But Piak Poster's meticulous control of production values and his development of code-breaking anti-for-

musical plots broke new ground and were a major step forward, blazing a trail for the next generation, who emerged with more overt determination to make so-called socially critical movies, or, what some might even see as a kind of 'modernist' filmmaking. This transcendence of the past of Thai movies, was, more or less, a result of the global influence of the 1970s culture of dissent.

The Rise of Modernism

In the West, according to David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson's summary in *Film History: An Introduction*, between the mid-1960s and the mid-1970s filmmaking and film viewing became political acts to a degree not seen since World War II. Students were questioning authority and rejecting traditional values. The postwar youth culture became a 'counterculture', a realm in which young people could explore lifestyles outside the mainstream. The counterculture in youth politics spanned a range of alternative lifestyles: free-flowing eroticism, immersion in rock music, experiment in communal living, and drug use in the name of expanded consciousness.

In the same way, as Thailand entered the 1970s the wave of youth counterculture broke across its borders. Through the flow of western pop culture such as rock music, books, movies, the counterculture had gradually been implanted into the Thai self image, as part of its coming-of-age. Dissent on the part of the young was a global phenomenon which had been constructed through shared oppositional stances, but it was experienced in different ways depending on the particular kind of oppression faced by each national youth. In the case of Thailand, students were questioning military control that had dominated the country for several decades, and which had been fully accepted by their parents' generation. Political oppression and the conservatism of their fathers' generation pushed them into the quest of their own identity and political freedom. All this finally erupted during the student demonstrations of October, 1973, and the students reasserted themselves in the October 6th, 1976 conflicts. Not surprisingly, the decade of the 1970s was then known as the soul-searching age when the youth generation looked into their own identity and surrounding society.

Like their counterparts in other regions, Thai students used pop culture as a medium to present their own ideology and standpoints.

T H A I L A N D

Music, books, drama, and other visual arts were all directed to the reflection of hidden messages and political ideas, better known as 'the arts-to-life,' no matter in terms of song-to-life, book-to-life and drama-to-life. To a certain degree, filmmakers - in how they chose to reflect society - were also influenced by this political culture of dissent, often known in Thai culture as 'political movies', which was in fact quite an overestimation. Compared to other forms of arts which could be created by an individual in a brief time, moviemaking was still lagging behind in terms of political development. The 1970s social-criticism movies were mostly constructed with the traits of social commentary, rather than as a force for radical change. They were limited by the demands of advanced technology and teamwork, and most importantly, by the censorship laws. Every Thai movie, even to the present day, is required to be submitted to the Police Department for permission for screening. In the 1970s, scenes that provoked repressive action by censors were those that could be construed as pro-communist, or which criticised corruption at high levels in the society, or attempted in dramatic ways to highlight social injustice. In the 1990s, censorship on the other hand is more relaxed, objecting mainly to matters that might be seen to criticise the monarchy, defame civil servants or defame actual individuals, even by means of allegory. Thus in the 1970s, Thai movies generally could not manifest demands for overt political change. This remark, however, is not intended to demean the so-called 1970s political movies. Indeed, as will be argued, with their sharply focused, and aesthetically provocative comments upon contemporary life, and the implicit challenges these films posed to the conventions of mass popular entertainment, there are some grounds for regarding the developments in the 1970s as a period of the emergence of Thai 'modernist' filmmaking.

The birth of modernist filmmaking started with the arrival of two movies in 1973: *Talad Phromajaree* ('The Virgin Market', 1973) and *Khao Chue Karn* ('Dr Karn', 1973), both films having been released a few months prior to the October 13, 1973 uprising. *Talad Phromajaree* was directed by Sakka Jarujinda, who had mainly directed television series before making a film about the hardships of the poor in *Wiman Slum* ('The Slum Paradise', 1971). Jarujinda achieved enormous success with *Talad Phromajaree*, the story of a poor fisherman who sells his daughter for a sum of money so that he can buy a

boat engine. The other legendary figure who emerged in the 1970s was Prince Chatreechalerm Yukol, who had previously worked in television and made only one science fiction thriller feature. Adapted from an award winning novel of the same name, *Khao Chue Karn* was his second work, portraying the corruption in local administrative bodies encountered by an idealistic young doctor. *Talad Phromajaree* and *Khao Chue Karn* explicitly showed Piak Poster's influence on both directors, particularly in terms of new moviemaking styles outside the popular genres of slapstick, melodrama and action. Both movies emulated the work of Piak Poster in their use of realistic plots and the care exercised in the making of the films, which for the first time attracted the intellectuals who hitherto had completely turned their backs against Thai movies.

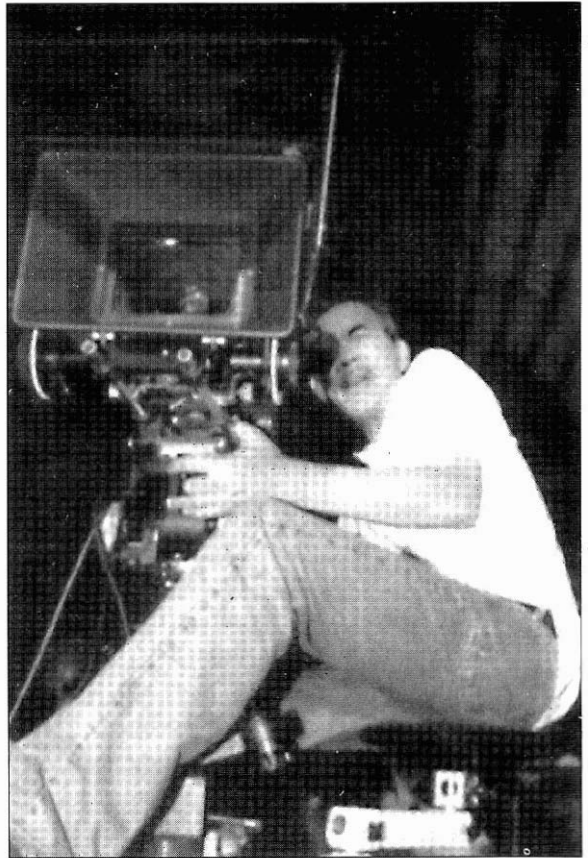
One of the consequences of *Khao Chue Karn*'s success was the subsequent path taken by the film's director, Prince Chatreechalerm, who later identified his works with social critique. Born a member of the Thai Royal family, a great-grandson of King Chulalongkorn, the modernising King at the turn of the century, and with both his own father and uncle being acclaimed film directors of melodrama, Prince Chatreechalerm established his own distinctive style and set of concerns by making innovative socially concerned movies. However, it is undeniable to say that his royal background strongly benefited his persistence in the genre. In *Khao Chue Karn*, for example, he tackled the issue of corruption, collusion and the hidden networks of power, for the first time during the reign of a military government. Initially, the film suffered the indignities of the censor's scissors and its release was held up. However, with his royal background Prince Chatreechalerm managed to meet and show the film to the then Prime Minister, Field Marshal Thanom Kittikajorn, who finally nodded his head and gave the film his blessings. *Khao Chue Karn* premiered in 1973.

Prince Chatreechalerm has consistently been a social critic in filmmaking since then. In the interim between two uprisings (1973 and 1976) when democracy was flourishing and artists in other disciplines enjoyed comparative political freedom, most Thai moviemakers did not have time to make films that reflected the political changes, because the period was too short before the absolute resurgence of dictatorial government. Prince Chatreechalerm on the other hand made

Prince Chatrichalerm Yukol, leading exponent of 'Thai modernist' cinema of social critique, his work influenced by the democracy movement of the 1970s.

Chatrichalerm Yukol is still one of Thailand's leading directors and one of his better known recent works is the environmental action-feature, *Khon Liang Chang* ('The Elephant Keeper', 1990).

(Courtesy of Thai National Film Archive)

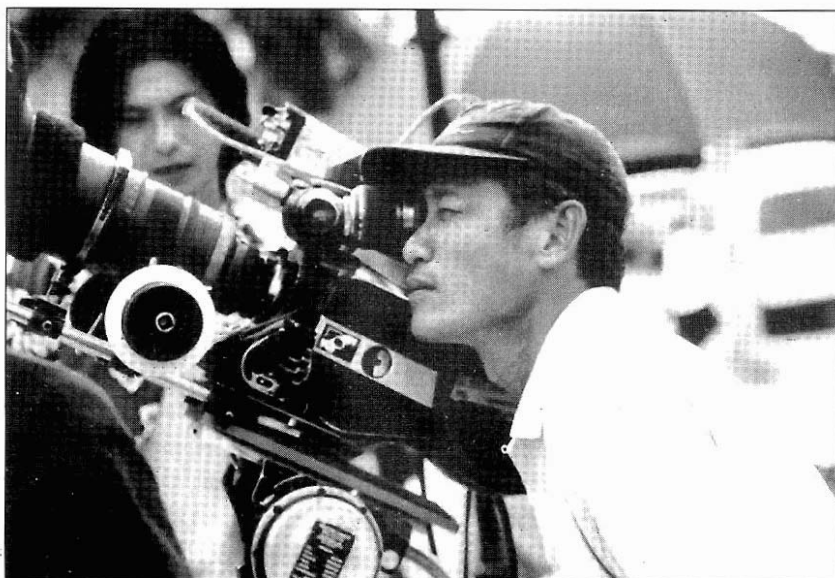


two movies to comment on the transitional society. Immediately when the October 1973 demonstrations began (leading to an uprising on October 14), Chatreechalerm took his camera along to film the demonstrations, and footage shot then was later inserted into his film about the sex-trade, *Thepthida Rongraem* ('The Angel', 1974). Subsequently, during the three year period of freedom, he commented on the increase in crime that was a side effect of the flourishing democracy, in *Thewada Dern Din* ('The Violent Breed', 1975). Only once in a while would Prince Chatreechalerm turn to other genres. For example, when the country was suddenly plunged back into the dark ages of military rule after the October 6, 1976 coup, he avoided the rigid martial laws by making a comedy.

T H A I L A N D

The dictatorial extremity of the post October 6, 1976 government lasted one year before being replaced by the new government which attempted to win the support of the people by cancelling strict laws and by opening a door for returned leftist-students. In this situation Thai filmmakers resumed social-critique works again. In fact the golden era of Thai social-criticism movies commonly fell into this period. Not only was the political situation relieved, but the boost to modernist filmmaking was also supported by the Government decision in 1977 to increase the tax on foreign films. In an attempt to promote indigenous Thai filmmaking, the government increased the tax from 2.20 Baht (US\$0.08) for every metre of footage, to 30 Baht (US\$1.20) per metre, a quite alarming figure, resulting in the collective boycott by distributors of foreign films in Thailand. Not surprisingly, after this a large number of Thai movies – up to 160 Thai titles – were made annually. An era of a more varied kind of modernist filmmaking began, because the emerging filmmakers in this period had a wide variety of backgrounds. Some had been journalists, others directors of TV commercial, and some were social workers, provincial villagers, and local and foreign film graduates.

The boom period of post-1976 Thai movies saw the emergence of many new directors in the Thai film industry at that time. Some of them became legendary figures and are still working today. One of them is Euthana Mukdasanit, who was a direct product of the youth counterculture. Euthana was a student of Thammasat University where the two student uprisings took place. Studying in journalism and acting, Euthana himself was a well known artist in the so-called political theatre during the rise of the student movement. After finishing his university studies, he worked as Prince Chatreechalerms' assistant. His first movie was produced by the production company owned by Prince Chatreechalerms' father, but the film was never finished due to financial problems and some other circumstances. Euthana started again and achieved his directorial debut in 1978 with *Thepthida Bar 21* ('The Angel of Bar 21', 1978), the story of a prostitute who financially supports a young man in his efforts to study, only to be deserted by him after he finishes his university education. The film had a moderate success and Euthana has been recognised as one of the most promising directors since then. As a director of feature films he has been less socially-committed than Prince Chatreechalerms, and made only



Leading Thai director of the 1980s and 1990s, Euthana Mukdasanit, director of such stylish and socially relevant films as *Namphu* (1984) and *Peesuea Lae Dokmai* ('Butterflies and Flowers', 1985) and, more recently, the popular melodrama, *Khu Gham* ('Sunset at Chaopraya'), 1996. (Courtesy of Thai National Film Archive)

two social-concerned movies: *Thepthida Bar 21* and *Thepthida Rong-ngan* ('The Factory Angel', 1982). Euthana's later works were mostly adapted from novels and short stories, some of which boosted him into the international arena. In 1984 he made *Namphu* ('The Story of Namphu', 1984), the real-life story of a Thai novelist's drug-addicted son and his rehabilitation in a Buddhist monastery noted for its unique program for curing drug addicts. One year later Euthana won the best film award from the Hawaii International Film Festival for *Pheesue Lae Dokmai* ('Butterfly And Flower', 1985), a film set in Southern Thailand and telling a story of innocent poor country children from a Muslim family, young teenagers, moving from their mid-school environment in a country town to uncertain employment prospects - involving employment even in small-time rice smuggling on trains crossing the border into Malaysia - and encountering an adult world on

the way. Both films are frequently listed as among the all-time best Thai films.

Prince Chatreechalerms is still a major figure making social criticism movies, occasionally alternating with other genres. Some of his best works were made during the post 1976 period. In 1977, he made *Thongpoon Khoke Pho* ('The Citizen', 1977), the story of a taxi driver, a migrant to Bangkok from the north east of Thailand, whose taxicab - the only means of earning his livelihood - is stolen and finally seeks his own quest for justice, at the same time discovering the social injustice faced by many other workers from the countryside, on the way. Despite the clear influence of Vittorio De Sica's *Bicycle Thieves* in the development of the film's main idea, the film is also known to reflect the director's own research into the world of Bangkok taxi-drivers. Chatree had been residing in a Bangkok hotel in order to write a script for another film, when a group of taxi drivers who took meticulous care of their taxis came to his notice. He followed the daily lives of these taxi drivers, and this gave him the details and the social background to flesh out the plot for *Thongpoon*. *Thongpoon* was an enormous success with both working-class and intellectual audiences, and was praised as one of his best films. Chatree made another legendary film again several years later with *Mue Puen* ('The Gunman', 1983). It was inspired by his barber who told Chatree about another barber who doubled as a hitman and had just shot a famous movie businessman. The idea for the film was developed because it dawned on Chatree that the same hands that cut our hair could also cut our throat. This film implies that the man's war experiences (he was a veteran of Thai involvement in the Vietnam war) had played a key role in forming his character.

Despite a strong social commitment, Prince Chatreechalerms's films sometimes betray a top-down point-of-view, perhaps due to his royal background. While the public enjoyed the freedom during the post October 1973 uprising, he expressed his negative point of view in *Thewada Dern Din* ('The Violent Breed', 1975) by presenting images of pervasive flourishing crime. Furthermore his movies have an element of fatalism, his poor heroes are often trapped into some kind of dead-end at the end of his movies - either dying or being imprisoned. The movies thus end in apparent pessimism at social injustice and lack of hope for the poor, and usually they do not provide a solution to the

problems they pose. His works are, like those of other Thai 'modernist' filmmakers, mainly just a societal reflection. His plans as to how social development might be achieved are quite ambiguous. Once in an interview, when asked why his films concentrated on the poor, he briefly replied that for him, as a filmmaker, 'it is the lives of the poor that are most challenging to develop into a film'.

The post October 6, 1976 modernist filmmakers included both old and new generation filmmakers, who made a number of socially concerned stories. In fact most of Thailand's all-time best films are the products of this period, and these films are the most regularly invited to many international film festivals. In general there are two types of modernist films. The first category often depicts people struggling in urban areas - often they are the poor, or people who have moved to the city from country areas, and who become victims of their own precarious situations and are taken advantage of by corrupt city-folk, whether civil servants, criminals or even the police. The works of Prince Chatreechalem and Euthana fall into this groups. But there are other significant films in this category, for example *Cheewit Budsob* ('The Hell Life', Permhol Choei-arun, 1976), which tells of the revenge of a young man who is maltreated and his wife is raped by a gangster. The other type of socially concerned film commonly depicts the struggle of villagers with endemic local corruption of the rural areas in which they live. Old-timer Vichit Kunavuthi, who had previously worked in several genres, made the scene with the box-office success of *Khon Phukhaõ* ('Mountain People', 1979), the life of hill tribe people in Thailand, as well as *Luk Isan* ('Northeastern Son', 1982), an adaptation of a best-selling novel about the lives of northeastern villagers. There was also a group of northeastern directors who made a phenomenal success with *Khru Bannok* ('The Rural Teacher', 1978), a story about a young man who returns to teach poor children in his home town in a northeastern province.

Thai 'modernist' movies are not the same as European modernist movies, such as the films of Godard, Pasolini, Antonioni and Fassbinder, whose films commonly featured unusual stylistic and formal elements, and even Brechtian distanciation, and sometimes a slow pace. 'Thai modernist' filmmaking did not contain all these elements, however, both because the film culture was less developed, and the priorities were different. Compared to the style and content of Thai pop-

ular cinema, however, most of which were far from being realist, Thai modernist filmmakers sought to reveal the unpleasant realities of class antagonism, the hardships faced by the poor, societal injustice and corruption. Furthermore many of the 1970s Thai modernist movies were adapted from famous novels also concerned with Thai society in transition, some of which were award-winning novels. Sometimes, as in Prince Chatreechalerm's *The Gunman*, the exploration of the society was done through amalgamating social research with generic elements - the film is a detective story, which also reveals the society. In Chatreechalerm's works, such as *The Gunman*, Thai modernism is then a combination of a popular genre, with action scenes, unusually prominent realistic social detail, and socially directed irony and symbolism. But like much of the 1970s and early 1980s 'Thai modernist' filmmaking, all this was in the service of reflecting the society, rather than providing solutions.

Social-problem movies existed for several following years, until 1981, when distributors of foreign films ceased boycotting American movies, and they began to flood back. At the same time video was also imported into Thailand. The arrival of videos too had a strong impact on Thai movies in general, leading to a period of overall decline, which in turn largely affected the viability of social-problem films. Ever since these changes, the making of social problem movies has begun to decline, and almost completely stopped in 1986. Only Prince Chatreechalerm still carries on making social issues movies to date, among his best in the 1990s being *Elephant Keeper* (1991).

However, in attempting to survey the overall production of a film industry, one must look at the diversity of material being produced, rather than consider only one type of film. Despite the emergence of social-criticism movies from 1970 to 1986, the Thai movie industry still continued to make films that had gained it success with a wide variety of audiences. Generally, the majority of movies in this period can be accounted for in terms of four genres: comedy, action, drama and fantasy. Among major popular successes of this period were the films *Luang-ta* ('Old Monk 1') and its sequel *Luang-ta 2* (Old Monk 2), both directed by Permhol Choei-arun, which created a folk hero out of a Buddhist monk rearing orphans in his monastery in the first film, and then involved in the problems of a rural community in

the sequel. *Old Monk 1* has elements of rural slapstick comedy, and the gangster film, located - somewhat incongruously - in a monastery setting.

Another of the most important filmmakers of this period whose work does not fit into the category of socially critical filmmaking is Cherd Songsri. In 1978 Cherd Songsri broke the all-time box office record for Thai movies at that time (US\$ 530,000) with *Phlae Kao* ('The Scar', 1977), the tragic story of the fated love of two peasants, set in the 1930s. The film begins with two lovers swearing eternal love under the Sai tree, where spirits are worshiped; but the lovers are later separated when the young woman is sent to the city to work as a housemaid. Under the main theme of love, the movie excited Thai audiences with a spectacle of rural lifestyle and nostalgia, and the film also won prizes in Europe and at Asian film festivals. There are dif-



Poster for Cherd Songsri's 1977 film *Phlae Kao* ('The Scar'), a film which attracted much attention both in Thailand and internationally. Many of Cherd Songsri's films recreate a sense of traditional, rural, pre-modern Thailand, seeing the basis of the Thai personality in rural life and rural traditions. (Courtesy of Thai National Film Archive).

fering views these days about Cherd's work. Some Thai critics see Cherd as promoting just the image of Thailand that foreigners want to see – an exotic traditional Eastern society. But to be fair, it must be said that Cherd himself would see his repeated attempts to create a sense of traditional, often rural, pre-modern, Thailand, as an important work of cultural resistance, an attempt to delineate the Thai personality and its basis in rural life and rural traditions, and to examine the importance of Buddhism as not only a religion but as an element significantly shaping Thai character. In *The Scar* Cherd attempted to recreate rural Thailand of 50 years before, including in the film the architectural styles, dress, music and religious festivals of the period. Among the best of Cherd's more recent works is *Amdaeng Muen Kab Nai Rid* ('Muen and Rid', 1994), which has as its theme women's emancipation during the reign of 19th century King Mongkut, and which tells the story of a woman who escapes from an arranged marriage and lives with a Buddhist monk - her case being championed at the end by the king himself. Cherd Songsri has also made fantasy films, usually with quite intricate narrative construction, and there is no doubt that his films are the work of an exceptionally fine craftsman.

In certain respects the period between the early 1970s and the early 1980s was one of the best times for Thai Cinema. In this period many Thai movies were selected for presentation at international festivals. It is not an overestimation to call the 1970s modernist filmmaking one of the rare 'golden' eras of Thai cinema.

Teens Take the Scene

One of the factors ushering in the change in Thai cinema in the 1970s was a change in the nature of film audiences. In the early 1970s, the interest on the part of educated and intellectual classes in film viewing boosted the popularity of social-problem movies. A similar paradigm shift in audiences took place in the mid 1980s, with the emergence of teen movies after the decline of modernist filmmaking. Since then, teenage audiences have dominated Thai theatres; while the older generation has stayed at home.

To a certain extent the emergence of teen movies in the 1980s is related to the birth of a production company, Tai Entertainment, and the arrival of two new directors, Thanit Jitnukul and Adirek Wattalela. Tai Entertainment was founded by the Poolworaruk family, a local

movie exhibitor. In the 1980s this group became an important setter of new trends by setting the company's sights on enlarging teenage audiences. They set trends again in 1994 by leading the movement to upgrade cinemas throughout Bangkok. In the 1980s Tai Entertainment altogether changed the Thai cinema target audience for Thai productions from the general public to the specifically teenage group. Several years later, Tai Entertainment revolutionized theatre standards, moving from old stand-alone cinemas and run-down mini-theatres, to the deluxe culture of multiplex cinemas located in shopping complexes.

With the company's first production *Suem Noi Noi, Kalon Mak Noi* ('Be More Crafty, Hide Your Dullness', Thanit Jitnukul and Adirek Wattalela, 1985), Tai Entertainment gained an enormous success with the story of a group of friends who enjoyed daily lives with fun and girls. Not surprisingly, the serial *Pluem* ('Delighted', 1986), with similar themes, was produced one year later, and since then has been followed by an influx of similar stories. Of all these youth-targeted movies, the *Boonchoo* serials were among the most popular. Directed by Bandit Ritthakol, *Boonchoo* was made up of six serials about the life of a rural boy who moves to study in Bangkok. Constructed as comedies, the serials start with Boonchoo taking special tuition in preparation for university entrance, passing his exams, enjoying his college life, starting working life and then setting up his own family. The serials hit the box-office record even in the course of its first two parts, and continued to enjoy market saturation subsequently.¹⁰⁰

The box-office and critical success of both *Suem Noi Noi, Kalon Mak Noi* and *Pluem* in the mid 1980s had a strong impact on the kinds of films that producers were prepared to finance in Thailand over the next decade. Originally targeting audiences in all classes of Thai society, then concentrating to some extent on the intellectual group in the social-critique era, Thai cinema now aimed at young generation film goers who found new and exciting fads and fashions in the works of both new directors, Thanit and Adirek. As a matter of fact, both directors did not forge much ahead, in terms of film style, but they did make improvements in production quality, particularly for popular cinema. Originating as poster artists and movie buffs, these directors made films that offered a better visual standard in Thai popular movies and this was appreciated by the audiences. Brought up on the video

culture that had emerged a few years earlier, the new teen generation was tending to completely replace older audiences. While the early 1980s films attracted spectators aged up to 25, audiences for the teen flicks that emerged from the mid 1980s on were mainly under 17.

The change to the dominance of the teen-targeted movie was confirmed with the arrival of another Tai Entertainment production, *Kling Wai Kon Phor Son Wai* (Somjing Srisuphab, 1991), which might be translated as 'Smooth Talker, My Son', but which had an official English title 'The Time Not Beyond'. Clearly targeted at high-school audiences, the film is flooded with the jokes and fun characteristic of the Thai high-school student lifestyle, and broke all records for the Thai box-office in 1991. Since then the Thai mainstream film industry has been dominated by teen flicks for the following decade. In general teen flicks are defined by the co-presence of three elements: teen or classroom drama, comedy and romance. Despite many efforts by individual filmmakers to encourage the resurgence of other kinds of films, most of the directors attempting to make other kinds of works failed to attract audiences, even with good films. Prince Chatreechalerms retained his social-criticism style with *Khon Liang Chang* ('The Elephant Keeper', 1991) a film at one time expected to be nominated for an Academy-Award. This film shows the devastation wrought on Thai forests as a result of illegal logging, and the disruption to the lives of rural people produced by the structural change in the rural areas - itself a result of the destruction of the forests. As with most of Chatreechalerms' films, the film included many action scenes, particularly the struggle going on between a forest warden and illegal loggers, and this time had as central figures an elephant used in logging, and his keeper, affected by the change to the forests. Although *Elephant Keeper* did not gain an Academy Award, it was invited to numerous festivals. However in Thailand it was not a commercial success. Taking heed of the Thai market, Chatreechalerms adjusted his tune by making a teenage social-problem film in *Sia Dai* ('Daughter', 1995), about the daughter of a rich family who drops out and becomes a drug addict, the film showing numerous scenes of glue sniffing among the Bangkok youth. This film was very successful and resulted in a sequel, *Sia Dai 2*, which, while having a similar title ('Daughter 2', 1996), in its story about AIDS had little to do with the themes of the earlier film. Euthana Mukdasanit has also had to face

the overriding competitiveness of the teenage movie and after he moved to be the top executive of record-cum-movie company, Grammy Film, he was heavily involved in their teen movie projects. He was one of three directors working on Grammy's *Red Bike Story* (1997), which starred two top singers, Patiphan Pathaweekarn and Tata Young. He was one of the two scriptwriters as well as a producer of Grammy's *O-Negative* (1999), directed by Phinyo Rutham. And while Cherd Songsri has not made films for teenage audiences, his recent works have not done as well at the box office as his films of the 1980s. Apart from his film about a feminist in the 19th century, *Muen and Rid*, (1994), in the 1990s Cherd Songsri has made elaborate fantasy films about time travel enabling comparisons between different eras, either back to the 1930s, for example in *Tawipop* ('Another World', 1990) and even between the eighteenth century and contemporary Bangkok in *Ruen Ma Yu Ra* ('House of the Peacock', 1995).

Along with teen flicks, the 1990s decade was also flooded with B-grade movies, which reflects the two-tiered system of Thai film going. These movies were made by small independent companies, most of which were based outside Bangkok, and then screened only in second-class suburban or provincial cinemas. In Thailand, movie theatres and cinema going have been classified into two groups. While in Bangkok, there has been a steady investment in the building of modern multiplex cinemas, particularly in shopping complexes, and audiences were offered a variety of films reflecting new tastes and quality films. On the other hand in upcountry Thailand, most theatres are still run-down stand alone cinemas, where audiences are offered movies only as a mass entertainment. Most movies shown in these venues fall into four genres: ghost stories, slapstick, drama and action, and soft porn. One of the enormous successes of B-Grade movies is *Ban Phee Pob* ('The Ogre Ghost House') a film so popular that 13 subsequent sequels have been made, all with the same actors and characters, and specially targeted at rural audiences. Unlike American B-grade and independent movies, which usher in a light of hope in Hollywood, Thai B-grade and independent movies represent the return of low grade mass entertainment that occupied the Thai film industry before the emergence of the 1970s social-critique movies.

Capitalism Takes Precedence

Teen flicks have consistently dominated the Thai film screens in the 1990s. Two emerging circumstances have added impetus to the development of this kind of audience: an American demand for a reduction of the tax on foreign movies, and the multiplexing boom, already mentioned. In order to reduce the pressure on Thailand from the legal implications of intellectual property rights tackled under the regime of President Clinton in 1993, the Thai government agreed to change the 1976 film import-tax regulation from 30 Thai Baht (US\$1.20) to 10 Baht (US\$0.40) for every metre of footage imported. One year later the first multiplex was launched by a joint venture of locally-based Tai Entertainment Theatres Network and the Hong Kong and Australian based chain, Golden Village. These companies could expect to profit from the surge in American films imported, as well as from the teen movies. The multiplexes proved so popular that a number of businessmen rushed to share in the bonanza. In two years about 180 multiplex theatres were built in Bangkok alone.

The arrival of the multiplexes caused a massive rise of film grosses in Thailand and has led to the dominance of the Hollywood blockbuster in the Thai market. Ever since the decrease of the import film tax, Hollywood movies have consistently achieved enormous successes. Six of the top ten grossers at the end of 1994 were Hollywood productions, and all top ten grossers in 1998 were from Hollywood. Between 1994 and 2000, the top grossers have each year achieved higher takings than the year before, from US\$2 million with *Speed* in 1994, more than doubling to US\$5 million with *Titanic* in 1998. Initially, Thai movies shared some parts of the pie, also achieving unprecedented takings at the box office. Last year the box office for the all-time top grossing Thai film was quadrupled over a 5 year period, from the US\$1.2 million with *Boonchoo 7* (Bandit Ritthakon, 1993) to nearly US\$4 million with *Nang Nak* ('Mrs Nak', Nonsee Nimibutr, 1999). In this culture of blockbusters, the entry of two record companies played an integral part - RS Production and Grammy Entertainment. These companies were the two most successful record studios and, owing to their financial links to the media, and their control of superstars in the music world, it was not difficult for them to expand into the film sector. RS Film came first with the opening of *Kerd Eek Thee Tong Mee Thur* ('Rebirth Only of You', Praty

Pinkaew, 1995), the love story of a man who does not want to die to protect his girlfriend, and *Loke Thang Bai Hai Nai Khon Dia* ('Romantic Blues', Rachen Limtrakul, 1995), an MTV-style story of a triangular love between three teenagers. Both films were directed by the company's former music video directors, starred top singers, and their release was accompanied by the release of a soundtrack album. Not surprisingly, both films hit the record for all-time Thai film grosses. Grammy Film followed in the same year with *Khoo Gam* ('Sunset at Chao Phraya', Euthana Mukdasanit, 1995), yet another remake of a top novel set in Bangkok during the Second World War, a novel which had already been made into thirteen TV serials and movies. Grammy Film appears to have tried to minimise accusations of capitalising - yet again - on the record business, by asking the former new-wave director, Euthana Mukdasanit, to direct the film, perhaps with the aim of making the best version of this bestseller. But the music influence persisted even in this film, for the superstar Thongchai McIntyre, an actor-cum-singer, who had gained enormous popularity playing the same role in the TV series, was cast to take the leading role.

Within the profit and capitalism of the mid-1990s, Thai film culture, the value of Thai film, was then evaluated - or rather calculated - largely in terms of blockbuster success. While there was an undeniable improvement in production quality, particularly in the quality of the visuals, nevertheless plots and themes were still limited to those that appealed to under-17 audiences. There was no room for any other genres. In fact, despite an almost alarming rise in the number of screens resulting from multiplexing, the industry entered into the monopoly era. No fledgling director in Thailand can rise without making a deal with one of the seven major production companies, all of which control some aspects of the business. Based on their facilities, they fall into three categories: the theatre owners; the record-cum-film companies, and those who own the good production labs. Usually these are areas which can be used as a 'bargaining chip'. In a way, these companies depend on and support one another. Deals are usually made based on mutual needs. Theatre owners need the superstars from record companies to sell the films, while record companies - though equipped with media superstars - lack venues for their film releases. It is a similar scenario in the dealing between the theatre owners and the production labs.

Not all the films made under these arrangements were simply commercial compromises. For example Udom Udomroj's film *Kutair Sawng Lok* ('A Couple in Two Worlds', 1995), shown at the Singapore Film Festival in 1995, a film about a reluctant female vampire, was a clever Thai reworking of the vampire genre. But even this film, made by one of Thailand's more innovative directors of the 1990s, had a famous Thai singer as the male lead (Saharat Sungkhapreecha - better known as 'Kong from Nuvo'), so its financing was dependent on the kind of relationship to the music industry that I have just described.

In the course of the 1990s - the decade of teen flicks - the Thai film industry eventually paid the price when Thailand faced a general economic downturn in 1998, with the South East Asian economic crisis. As film goers became more careful in how they spent their money, Thai movies became their second choice, even for those teen film goers who used to be regular fans. Theatre owners at the same time turned their backs against Thai movies, and this resulted in the shut down of whole production departments or the delaying of filmmaking projects. The old doomsayers of a dying industry are back again. But the Thai film industry is a strange circle where trajectories of rise and fall always walk in an interlinking parallel. Upon the doom and gloom, a hopeful but unclear future emerged at the turn of the century.

The Emergence of Novelty and a New Independent Sector

Amidst the cashstrapped flow of teen flicks, two advertising-based directors emerged in 1997, creating a sensation in Thai film circles. Nonsee Nimibutr made his directorial debut, *2499 Anthaphan Krong Muang* ('Daeng Bailey and the Young Gangsters', 1997), the story of a real-life criminal, Daeng Bailey, in the 1950s. The film became a legend when it broke the all-time Thai film gross, and drew the older generation back to the cinemas to watch a Thai movie. Another newcomer, Penek Ratanaruang, on the other hand, did not enjoy the same box office success with his directorial debut, *Fun Bar Karaoke* (1997), but his film became the talk of the town, with international successes even before its release at home.

One interesting point in this development is the directors' backgrounds. Both were graduates in arts studies and possessed a long experience in making television commercials. Their works are thus rich in the aspect of visual design, especially Nonsee's films. His



A scene from *Talok 69* ('6ixtynin9', 1999), the most recent feature by Penek Ratanaruang, one of the new generation of directors in Thailand, trained in television but influenced by the American independent film. (Courtesy of Thai National Film Archive)

works concentrate on creating a strong visual style, especially in his second movie, *Nang Nak* (Mrs. Nak, 1999). This film also broke the all-time record, held by his earlier film about Daeng Bailey. *Nang Nak* reworks a well-known tale of a female ghost who is obsessed with love for her husband, and who lingers in life in order to be able to live as a couple, rather than to be overtaken by death. The story is a legend that is known by every Thai, and which has already been made into innumerable movies or television series. In his adaptation, Nonsee is explicitly influenced by Hollywood-style spectacle. Every shot is carefully set up and intended to excite film audiences with its visual quality alone.

Penek concentrates more on acting style than visuals, but he is quite influenced by American independent style both in his directorial debut, and in his second movie *Talok 69* ('6ixtynin9', 1999). Most of the scenes and editing were invented to resist the more conventional style of Hollywood narrative film. The arrival on the Thai film scene

of both directors has created a warmer interest in employing directors who have cut their teeth making television commercials.

As the Thai mainstream set too many rules for the entry of newcomers, young filmmakers now try their own way to make a movie. At the end of the 1990s we have seen a really exciting development in the emergence of a new breed of alternative filmmakers. Put simply, the late-1990s alternative cinema in Thailand is made up of movies financed by funds from sources outside the big production companies: from friends or relatives, sales of artworks, or donations from cultural organisations. Most of these films are shot with a 16mm camera which costs less than the 35mm camera. These films are usually screened at cultural centres or privately-owned art houses.

In most countries, in the development of a vital film culture, many parallel activities go on at the same time, and also play an integral part. In Thailand in the latter part of the mid 1990s, we have seen the simultaneous emergence of many activities that have given a boost to film culture. In 1997 the first Short Film Competition was held by the Thai Film Foundation. This was an enormous success, and has now become the main annual venue for alternative filmmakers in Thailand. Many international film festivals have also been launched in the kingdom, adding significantly to the necessarily interrelated activities of film culture.

In the entry to the millennium, a brilliant light for the Thai film industry as a whole seems to lay ahead. But it will be a long time before we can be sure of this. Despite a lot of film enthusiasts from many walks of life, the industry has always obstructed the arrival of newcomers. However, there is one common fact about the Thai film world, that is, the rises and falls are always in some sense in parallel. Like the titles of the first Thai film, *Choke Song Shan* ('Double Luck', Luang Anurak-rattakarn, 1927), and the first Thai talkie, *Long Thang* ('Going Astray', Kun Vijitmatra, 1931), the Thai film industry is sometimes doubly lucky and sometimes lost.

Further Reading

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Some Significant Thai Films Since 1970

The following list has been compiled on the basis of popularity in Thailand and/or the degree of influence on Thai cinema, rather than on overseas recognition. The year is indicated by the release year, not the year of production.

1970 *Tone* ('A Man Called Tone', Piak Poster)

1973 *Talad Phromajaree* ('The Virgin Market', Sakka Jarujinda)

1973 *Khao Chue Karn* ('Dr. Karn', Prince Chatreechalerm Yukol)

1977 *Thongpoon Khoke Pho* ('The Citizen', Prince Chatreechalerm Yukol)

1977 *Phlae Kao* ('The Scar', Cherd Songsri)

1978 *Khru Bannok* ('The Rural Teacher', Surasee Phatham)

1982 *Luk Isan* ('The Northeastern Son', Vijit Kunavuthi, 1982)

1984 *Namphu* ('The Story of Namphu', Euthana Mukdasanit)

1985 *Suem Noi Noi, Kalon Mak Noi* ('Be More Crafty, Hide Your Dullness', Thanit Jitnukul and Adirek Wattalela)

1986 *Boonchoo* ('The Story of Boonchoo', Bandit Rithakol)

1991 *Kling Wai Kon Phor Son Wai* ('The Time Not Beyond', Somjing Srisuphab)

1997 *Fun Bar Karaoke* (Penek Ratanaruang)

1999 *Nang Nak* ('Mrs. Nak', Nonsee Nimitbut)